

Oren Cravath case

Congregational Church, Homer, New York

1944 - 1945

Spec. Coll. / Anti-Slavery

Anti-Slavery

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The documents which tell the story of Oren Cravath's withdrawal from the Congregational Church in Homer, New York, because that organization would not take a firm enough stand on the slavery question make an interesting, if minor, chapter in the history of the Abolitionist movement. This case has certain Oberlin connections as well.

Oren Cravath lived in Homer during the closing years of the pastorate of the Rev. John Keep who left there and came to Ohio for the same reason (among others) that Cravath gives for severing his own connection with the church. Cravath was an ardent Abolitionist and his farm near Homer is said to have been a station for the Underground Railroad. He moved his family to Oberlin in 1851(1), the year after Keep had retired from active ministry and come here to live. In 1856 or 1857 (probably the latter, since this is the date of Erastus Cravath's graduation from Oberlin College) the family moved westward again, this time to Winona County, Minnesota, where the father took government land and where he died in 1874. For documentation of the Cravaths in Minnesota, see a letter from the Minnesota Historical Society and one from Oren's granddaughter, Bessie Cravath Miller, which are appended.

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(1) cf. article on his son Erastus Milo Cravath in the Dictionary of American Biography

To the Congregational Church of Homer.

Having been connected with the presbyterian and congregational Church, for more than eighteen years, more than thirteen of which I have been connected with you; and believing as I do in the importance of maintaining the institutions of the Gospel, the thought is very painful, that a state of things exists, which renders it improper, for me longer to remain in your connexion.

The same doctrines of christianity, which I first embraced, are still dear to my heart, and I see more and more, the necessity of carrying them into practical effects, in all the duties incumbent upon me, as a neighbor, as a professing christian, and as a citizen of these United States. Yet, my attachment to the doctrines you profess, cannot, and does not, lead me to overlook the fact, that you hold ecclesiastical connexion with so called Christian churches, which allow their members to enslave their fellow men, sell them in the market, and rob them of all that is dear to them on earth.

When I connected myself with the presbyterian church, I knew that slavery existed in our beloved country; but supposed, as I now do, that slaveholders, were mostly made up of vicious and profligate men, who feared not God nor regarded the rights of their fellow men. But I did not know, that the professed church of the living God, was entangled in this abomination. I was not aware that slaveholders, and slaveholding ministers, were in good standing, and christian fellowship with the presbyterian church; and that they quietly enjoyed seats in Presbyteries, Synods, and even in the General Assembly, with which you are connected; and it has been with grief and astonishment, that I have witnessed the course pursued by those bodies, and the churches connected with them, for the last ten years.

When I first learned that slavery was countenanced by nearly all religious denominations in this country, I believed, that as soon as these facts could be brought before the northern churches, they would take decided and efficient action, and redeem themselves, from all participation in the crime. But years have gone by, and through the blessing of God, truth has been presented, and the churches cannot plead ignorance; although I am aware many have avoided the light, and taken sides with the oppressor, and still apologize for the continuance of this sin. And what is now the position of the presbyterian church? At the last meeting of the General Assembly of the presbyterian church, after having the subjects ably discussed, the following resolution was adopted by a vote of 66 to 33. "Resolved that this Assembly do not think it for the edification of the church, for this body to take any action on this subject." And yet they did take action on the subject, by receiving the Synod of Missouri, and the Synod of Kentucky, under their care and allowing the commissioners to take their seats in that assembly. Thus while they could take no action disapproving of the system, they took action approving by receiving those slaveholding synods, and admitting an addition of slave-holding, or slavery justifying ministers, to seats in that Assembly. And yet nearly all the Synods and Presbyteries have quietly acquiesced in their doings. But one Presbytery in all this land, so far as I can learn, has spoken out against their course.

The Synod, with which you are connected, soon after the meeting of the Assembly passed several resolutions on the subject of slavery, but in none of them, was there the least intimation of a disapproval of the doings of the Assembly; or a desire that measures should be taken to separate the church from this abomination. But this same body could enter their "solemn protest" against the practise of those Philanthropists, who use the Sabbath to plead the cause of their enslaved fellow men, and to show the exceeding wickedness, of sustaining this system of oppression, by sustaining the human enactments which uphold it; and further they would warn the churches not to countenance such meetings, stigmatizing under the names of

"harangues", the sabbath addresses of those Philanthropists, who, for the last ten years have felt it to be their imperative duty to expose the enormous wickedness of the system, so far as in their power, on every day of the week, until the professed christian church, shall rid herself of this sin, or specially, so long as the subject is so much neglected, by the professed ministers of the gospel.

Much the same course was taken by the ~~Presbytery~~ of Cortland. And the last hope of antislavery men was, that the churches would take the matter in their own hands, and redeem themselves from the guilt, and odium which the higher bodies incurred, by refusing to take decided action against it.

Some of the church have acted worthy of their high professions. But what is the ground taken by you as a church? A few years ago you manifested a disposition to give one of your members a letter, to join a slave holding church; but objection being made, your officers have neglected to lay the matter before you for your decision, and up to this time it remains unsettled, and your rules have been thus violated, as I believe, to avoid agitating the question. And although you have passed strong resolutions condemnatory of the "system of American Slavery", you have not manifested the least disposition to separate yourselves, from the bloody perpetrators of this crime.

When I presented a resolution on the subject, I felt it was the least any anti-slavery man could ask, under the circumstances we were placed; and when you deliberately laid it on the table, thus placing it beyond the power of the majority to take it up again, I came to the conclusion, that it was my duty, to withdraw from your connexion, however painful it might be to myself, or to those of you who are laboring to promote the cause of freedom; and who yet hope the church will act her part, in the great and glorious cause.

As the preamble and resolution, which I presented has been misrepresented by some of you I will here repeat it.

Whereas, there are in our land many professed christian churches, and many ecclesiastical bodies, which allow their members to hold their fellow men as property, and buy and sell the image of the blessed Saviour therefore

Resolved that we will withdraw all fellowship, and other ecclesiastical connexion, which may exist between us and those bodies.

What less than this can consistent antislavery men ask? But lest I should come to hasty conclusions I have delayed. But for the last six months, in view of the position taken by the Presbyterian Church from the general Assembly down to the individual churches; I have more than ever felt that I cannot remain longer in its connexion, without proving treacherous to the cause of truth and righteousness, as well as the cause of my enslaved countrymen; who have so long enlisted my sympathy, and for whose benefits, considering the indifference manifested by so large a proportion of my countrymen, I have felt called upon, to devote so much time, and other means God has entrusted in my hands.

Some of you who are laboring in the antislavery cause may think differently, and although you may pursue a different course, you will have my best wishes. For one I feel the force of the remark lately made by C. M. Clay that "the time has now come, when the friends of Liberty and the craven slaves of despotism must stand apart". I believe this remark will apply to all voluntary associations, political, or religious.

Since I have been connected with you, your interests have lain near my heart. I have been exceeding anxious that a right course should be taken by you, in regard to the great questions of the day, specially the one I have mentioned. That I



should have done all I could, I do not pretend. Perhaps I have had too much regard for the feelings of the older brethren, who have been "totally opposed to having this subject introduced in religious meetings" and in many other ways come short of my duty to God and the church.

I do not leave you on account of any unkind feelings toward any of you. I am not conscious of the least unkind feeling toward you or toward the guilty slaveholders with which you stand connected, or any other class of my countrymen, however guilty I may esteem them; I would not infringe on the least of their or your rights, civil, or religious: but in faithfulness to you I feel bound to say, that I regard the course pursued by many of you, as extremely cruel, and so long as you continue to fellowship this iniquity, with the light now enjoyed, you wrong not only the oppressors but their helpless victims - the slaves, by the encouragement you thus give to lawmakers to continue the unrighteous human enactments, by which, they are deprived of all the blessings of civil, and religious liberty - and to the slaveholders, by the encouragement you thus give them to continue in their sin.

I do not leave you, because you do not all come up to the standard, which I have adopted, as my rule of action; for had not God of his infinite mercy, and abundant grace, called my attention to to the subject, and in a measure answered my prayer, that I might "feel for those in bonds as bound with them" by sending one and another and another from the great prison house, to tell me from their own lips, the story of their sufferings, and the wrongs inflicted upon them, I might have been sleeping over this great and momentous question, which now agitates nearly the whole civilized world - I might have been believing I was <sup>an</sup> "an abolitionist" and saying "be ye warmed and filled" without putting forth any effort in behalf of the oppressed - I might have been apologizing for the oppressor, rather than attempting to plead the cause of those, who cannot be heard for themselves, in any of our courts of law or halls of legislation.

I do not leave you on account of any difference of opinion on minor matters, or because I have sometimes differed with you, in regard to cases of discipline. I am more and more satisfied of the necessity of all reasonable acquiescence in the will of the majority; and I have always been pained to see contentions, and divisions, springing up among God's people, on points not essential to a spiritual state; or on differences of opinion, which may arise from the weakness of human understanding.

But the reason I feel called upon to leave you, is, because you are associated with those, who practise the sin of slavery, who are not only guilty of highest theft, but make merchandise of the "bodies and souls of men", crimes which I regard as striking at the vitals of Christianity, and as a fruitful source of all other crimes. And while this state of things exists, you are not disposed to treat them as offenders, although God has so expressed his abhorance of such conduct as to declare in his word that "he that stealeth a man and selleth him or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death".

I am aware that most of you flatter yourselves that your connexion with slaveholders, does not necessarily imply approbation of the system. But I appeal to every candid mind throughout the whole civilized world, and if need be to all coming generations; whether you bear that decided testimony against, and treat those who justify and practise this soul destroying sin, as the nature of the case demands.

You will all undoubtedly admit, that slavery would not have been so extended, strengthened, and perpetuated itself, as it has done, and is still doing, had it not been for the countenance, and support, it has received from the professed christian church. I attrie (attribute) it to the unholy alliance the church has formed with slavery; that ministers of the gospel and others, are thrust into prison in this

land, for rendering common acts of humanity to their dying fellow men, without producing equal sympathy from the church, that it would, were it done, by barbarians of other countries.

The confidence I have had in you, and the northern portion of the churches, with which you are connected, has induced me thus to continue in your connexion; but the abundant evidence, which has been furnished during the past ten years of the corruption, degradation, and apostasy of the southern portion, which has been spreading its corrupt influence through the whole north, leads me to the conclusion, that you are assuming a fearful responsibility in the course you are taking; in which I can no longer participate. I therefore consider myself under the most solemn obligation to say to you, and to the world, that so long as you maintain your present position, I shall consider myself as no longer one of your members, and in no measure responsible, for the course you may pursue.

I had intended to stop here; without alluding to the wrong and dangerous sentiments, from which slavery draws its life blood; sentiments, which, although not adopted in your creeds, are extensively adopted and practised upon, not only by religious teachers, but by a large proportion, of private members of the church. But since penning the foregoing my eye has fallen on a letter written by a D D, which, sets forth some of those sentiments, in so glaring a light, that I wish to bear my decided testimony against them; as tending, directly, to a rejection of the word and council of God, and the adoption of human expediency, and human probabilities as the rule of action.

I should not refer to them here, did they not come from a prominent Minister of the new school presbyterian church, and as I believe, suffered to pass, without public rebuke from those associated with him, or from the religious presses. I shall mention but one of those sentiments, and put that in his own words. It relates to the choice of Chief Magistrate of this nation, and was in answer to the inquiry which he conceived to be the will of God. "Suppose" he says "that there is no reasonable doubt, that one of two devils, one of which is a less devil than the other, will be actually elected let the Christian vote as he may; and that his vote will be utterly lost, if he does not vote for one of them, I think that an enlightened christian would vote for the least devil of the two."

If such sentiments as this and others I might mention were advanced by leading divines and published with the view to promote the election of civil rulers, who are guilty of heaven during crime of enslaving their fellow men, and so extensively adopted that but few if any pulpits occupied by the denomination, raised the least note of warning against the adoption of them; I say that if such a state of things existed, when I entered the presbyterian church, I was not aware of it. If this was the proper place to discuss the subject it might easily be shown, by his own reasoning, it is in consequence of such sentiments, that we were under the "necessity" which he represented us to be in.

I as firmly believe, as I believe there is a God, who has visited, with desolation and destruction, those nations, that dared oppress their fellow men; that unless much is done, and that speedily, to counteract such delusive sentiments, if devils are permitted to walk the earth in human form, they will be placed in the highest seats of power in the nation, and this guilty nation given up of God to "eat the fruits of their own way and be filled with their own devices" ourselves and posterity, deprived of the blessings, civil and religious, which we have so long withheld from 1/6 of our countrymen.

In thus giving my reasons, for leaving the presbyterian church, I have naturally only spoken of the dark side. But I am not insensible to the fact, that there are ministers, and many private members, yet connected with that church, who have done much to promote the cause of freedom. Many churches and some presbyteries have declared to the world, that they "cannot fellowship in communion with those who practise the sin of slave holding" and have expressed their opinion that "slaveholders should be dealt with as other offenders". Some are prepared to treat heresy on the subject of human slavery, as they would heresy on any other subject. I have no doubt that many ministers in that connexion are prepared to adopt the sentiments of the Synod of Michigan, that "Halls of infamous legislation do not constitute the Holy of Holies wherein the gospel ministry must not enter"; and are prepared to rebuke the abominations of the land, even though they may be sustained by human enactments.

I am sensible that many of you, mourn over the course, which induces me to leave your connexion, and were not important principles involved, I should have yielded to your desires. But all earthly associations will soon fail, and each of us give an account to the great Head of the church, as individuals. And permit me to remind each, and all of you with whom I have been associated, that what we do for our enslaved countrymen, or for a lost and ruined world, must be done soon. Let us remember the injunction of an infirm writer "whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" remembering that "there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave whither" we are hastening.

Homer, May 1845

Oren Cravath

There are two endorsements on the back of this letter

(in pencil)  
Oren Cravath's  
Communication  
Upon the subject  
of Slavery & c

May 29th 1845

(in ink)  
Oren Cravath  
Communications  
& action of the  
church thereon



The Committee appointed by the church at a regular meeting a few weeks since to confer with Bro. Oren Cravath in reference to his withdrawing from the watch & care of this church submit to the ch the following report -

In the discharge of the duty assigned them they waited upon Bro. Cravath soon after the church meeting & freely express'd to him their views and feelings in reference to the course wh he had pursued - they endeavored to show him not only that this church could not, & would not fellowship slavery & they therefore considered his course as an unnecessary & wrong one - But that it would prove deeply injurious to his own soul & to that of his family - that it would tend to injure rather than promote the cause of the slave - To these & other representations Bro. Cravath has returned the following answer -

(wh see )

In view of his decision therefore we can see but one course left for the church to pursue - We cannot regard it desirable for the church to entertain any such propositions as those wh (he) makes in his communication under existing circumstances - She must therefore withdraw her watch & care over him -

We recommend therefore to the church the passage of the following preamble & resolutions.

"Whereas Bro. Oren Cravath has withdrawn from the care & fellowship of this church on the ground of its alleged connection with & fellowship of slavery & whereas he still adheres to such a course not withstanding the efforts of the church to convince him of his error, Therefore resolved

1 That this church deeply deplores the existence of slavery in our country, & believes it to be a civil, social & moral evil of such a magnitude as that it sho call forth the united prayers & efforts of all christians to remove it from the church & the world and that this church therefore cannot & will not sustain any relation to it wh can properly be regarded as countenancing slavery -

Resolved 2nd that we regard the course of Bro. Owen Cravath in withdrawing from us on acct of our alledged connection with slavery as entirely uncalled for & wrong in itself - as injurious to himself & family, & to the cause of religion, & not of slavery - as one which fills us with regret -

And 3rd Resolved therefore in the lang'e of the Saybrook Platform "That he having by his course cut himself off from the church's communion - this church esteems & declares itself discharged of any further inspection over him -

All of wh is resp'y submitted

Thos. K. Fessenden

Rufus Boies

Chester Chamberlain

Endorsed on the back

Report of the Committee  
on the case of  
Oren Cravath  
June 1845

Whereas there are in our land many professed Christian Churches and other ecclesiastical bodies which allow their members to hold their fellow men as property and buy and sell the image of the Blessed Saviour thus tearing asunder all the dearest ties of our nature therefore

Resolved that we hereby withdraw all fellowship and other ecclesiastical connexion which may exist between us and those bodies.

Endorsed on the back

Oren Cravath's  
Resolution  
Jan'y 1844

To Rev T K Fessenden, Rufus Boies, Chester Chamberlain, and S S Bradford

I have duly considered on your suggestions, in relation to my further connexion with the Church, of which you are a committee. Much as I respect your opinions, I cannot adopt them, without doing violence to my own convictions of right and duty. Since I have seen the necessity, that strong and vigorous efforts should be put forth, in behalf of the enslaved millions of this land; I have felt bound to pursue a course, which has often been contrary to the advice of many learned and good men, whose opinions I had great reason to respect, and the temptation has often been strong, to yield my own sense of right, to the opinions of others. But feeling that I must give an account to God for myself and not for another, I have endeavored to pursue that course, which, in my own judgment, should honor him and exemplify the great principles of Christianity; however it might effect my standing or reputation among men. Had those who enlisted in the antislavery cause, listened to the council of the great majority, of the so called great and wise men of this nation, there would have been no antislavery societies, no meetings to discuss the subject, no presses to advocate the cause, and in fact no one would "open his mouth for the dumb".

I cannot but regard the connexion you continue to hold with those who practise the sin of slavery, as opposed to the great and fundamental principles of the Gospel, and as tending to uphold, strengthen and perpetuate slavery; but since it was tolerated and countenanced by the presbyterian church, and by you as a constituent part of that church, previous to my connexion with it, I ought not, and I do not, ask you to change your course to gratify my feelings. Since you and the church you represent, have manifested a disposition to justify and maintain such connexion, I have concluded peacefully to withdraw. I do not feel myself under the same obligation to the church, that I should had I been aware of the facts when I connected with it; nor have I felt that liberty to urge the subject on the consideration of the church, against the wishes of the older brethren, that I should have done, had slavery been introduced in the church since my connexion with it. Should the course I have taken, prove, as some of you anticipate injurious to the cause of emancipation, or any other just, and righteous cause, it would be a grief to my heart. But I do not believe any of you, or the church you represent, will so wrong your own souls, as not to put forth such exertions to redeem your country from this sin, as your best judgment dictates, merely because you may think I have overacted. I can see no cause of alarm on that point. If your course is approved by God and your own consciences, you have nothing to fear. He will bless whatever efforts you may put forth, in spite of any errors of mine, and so far as I am concerned, I shall endeavor to throw no obstacles in your way. And although I shall not cooperate with the church, you represent or in the present state of things, with any organized church, yet I hope and trust in God, that what influence I may have, will be exerted on the side of truth and righteousness, and against oppression.

Some of you express great concern at my standing alone, and at the loss of influence you anticipate. As to standing alone I do not believe the Saviour ever intended his disciples should endorse sentiments they did not believe, or associate with such manifest works of darkness, as is slavery, in order to church fellowship. As to influence; if I have nothing to recommend me to the confidence of the brethren, or the community, but a standing in the church; or if what influence I may have is not exerted on the side of truth, and humanity, the less influence I may have the better for the world.

I am sensible of my own liability to err, in judgment, and practice. Church associations when conducted on gospel principles, are undoubtedly of great benefit; yet experience teaches us they are no sure defense against falling into grievous sins. And should I now yield my own convictions of truth and duty, to gratify the brethren, or from the love of church associations, what reason should I have to expect, that grace I so much need, to prevent my being overcome, with the temptations

with which I am daily surrounded? What reason should I have to expect, that I should not abandon the cause of my enslaved countrymen, through respect to the opinions of others, or through fear of disturbing church associations?

You say the church has acknowledged the principle, that they should "feel for those in bonds as bound with them". I admit they have in theory; but I venture to say, that not one of them would hold church fellowship with the enslaver of himself or his family.

I have been induced to take the step I have taken, under the conviction that the church had taken a position they intended to maintain, and that therefore no reconciliation could be effected. I am yet of that opinion. But since some of the brethren thought I had not proposed what would be satisfactory, I would just say, that I can see no possible objection to the resolution I presented. But there are other ways the church might be clear from the responsibility, of fellowshiping this iniquity. For instance the adoption of the following resolution, "Resolved, that we regard those professing christians who enslave, buy and sell their fellow men, as unworthy of our confidence-as christian brethren, and should the general assembly, at its next session, neglect or refuse to treat those of their number who may practice these sins, as offenders, and recommend the churches to do the same, we shall consider it just cause of separation from them."

Much as I would rejoice to see such a position taken by the church, I do not expect it. I do not under the circumstances ask it, although (to say nothing of myself) I am confident the church cannot maintain its present position, with that harmony of feeling, which ought to exist between brethren.

But enough has been said. I regard the case as settled in my own mind. You will recommend such a disposition of the case as you think proper. I have only to say "let there be no strife" between us. Time will develop the true state of the case. The issue between us is a plain one.

Yours respectfully

Homer June 1845

Oren Cravath

Endorsed on the back

Oren Cravath  
Letter No. 2

## MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ST. PAUL 1, MINNESOTA

February 27, 1950

Miss Mary C. Venn  
Head of Reference & Circulation Dept.  
Oberlin College Library  
Oberlin, Ohio

Dear Miss Venn:

We have found several records concerning Oren or Orin Cravath. He is listed in the census of 1860 in Troy township, Winona county. His age is given as 54 and his family consisted of wife Betsy, age 49, children Bishop, 25, Llewellyn, 23, Lonira, 20 and Oren B., 16. All were born in New York. A biography of Llewellyn published in the Compendium of History and Biography of Central and Northern Minnesota, states that he was born in Courtland county, New York, March 11, 1838. At the age of twelve, his family moved to Oberlin, Ohio. "The family moved to Winona county, Minnesota in 1856, and the father took government land and developed a good property."

In A. T. Andreas' Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota, 1874, O. B. Cravath of St. Charles City is listed as coming to Minnesota in 1857.

The gravestone records of Hillside Cemetary, St. Charles township, compiled by Minnesota D. A. R., list both "Oren Cravath 1806-1874," and "Oren Burney Cravath 1844-1874 soldier."

Sincerely yours,

*Geraldine Martin*

Geraldine Martin  
Reference Ass't.

GM: jr



Black Mountain N. C.  
Feb. 6. '30.

My dear Miss Kern:

I am ashamed  
at not writing to you sooner - but  
we really did have quite an upset  
in my family arrangements at  
that time & then I got the prevailing  
epidemic illness, going round.

I never knew my Aunts  
grandfather, but what I have  
learned about him makes me  
feel he was a kind easy going  
& very useful man in church  
and civic affairs. His beautiful  
farm near Homer, N. Y. was a  
station on the Underground R. R.

I imagine that Dr. McManis's my grand father is in the  
overlin archives  
somewhere.

in slavery times. My father told me  
he often heard in the night the <sup>coming</sup>  
& goings of the fleeing slaves. My  
grandmother was the vital  
moving force in the family, no  
doubt not so lovable. There was a  
family of four boys and one girl.  
When the children were grown  
the Cravaths sold the farm and  
moved to Oberlin to educate the  
boys. My father was the only one  
who went thro college and the  
Livingston School. For with they  
moved in 1807. I cant tell you  
when he moved from there. The  
South Eastern part of Minnesota  
was opened at that time to settlers  
and the whole family being I think

farmers at heart took up land there about thirty miles from the Mississippi River and closer than that to the now northern line of Iowa.

I was born in 1868. I can remember my grandfather as a kind old man with a white beard lying on a sofa and catching the legs of his children with the handle of his cane. I must have been at least three because I rode the old white horse, within discrete limits. This would place Grandfather's death in at earliest the early seventies. He died in Partridge Township, Minnesota. I assume-

My father graduated <sup>from Oberlin</sup> in 1856. The tradition is he took up land in Minnesota during his junior year.

I've just remembered that I was  
born in my grandmother's  
house (as was there the custom)  
on this Minnesota farm, so  
Grandfather was in Saratoga  
in 1868 and alive in the early  
70's. His <sup>farm</sup> ~~farm~~ was the center  
of social activity. In season  
a large table by the road was kept  
full ~~for passers-by with~~ of water-  
melons for the pleasure of the  
passers-by; and my grandmother's  
breakfast bell at 5 A.M. was what  
the community clocks were  
set by.

This is all I can give in data.  
Most of our old stuff is gone but I'll  
look over a few places where I might  
find an In Memoriam of my Grand-  
father. I'm not quite over my  
illness yet. If this is too late please  
return this card. It has been a  
pleasure to write; I'll look if you tell me to.  
Bessie Cravath Miller.